

Thank you in Hebrew

What's the best language for it?

Gratitude

This week, a friend of mine shared a story from a few years back when he took his family on a trip to Israel.

Upon their arrival, his eldest son, who was about 21 years old at the time, turned to his younger brother who had a better grasp of Hebrew, and asked him to help him learn how to say “thank you” in Hebrew; he wanted to be able to thank people in their native tongue. His brother responded with a straight face, that the correct phrase was “boker tov.” As they journeyed through Israel, regardless of the time—be it day or night—whenever a moment called for appreciation, he would wholeheartedly express it with the words “boker tov.” The bartender gave him funny looks, but he didn’t seem to notice.

On the final day of their trip, as they got ready to leave, his younger brother finally revealed to him that those two words actually meant “Good morning”...

On a more serious note, the story is told about a prominent rabbi in Israel who needed to undergo a complex surgery, and they especially flew in a renowned surgeon from the United States to perform the procedure. After the surgery, the rabbi asked his assistants to teach him how to say “thank you” in English. He insisted on repeating the words “thank you very much,” practicing over and over again until he remembered it

perfectly.

His assistants argued that he should just say *Todah Rabah*—which the doctor also understood—but he refused, and when he finally met the doctor, he warmly shook his hand and said “thank you” in English. Knowing that the rabbi spoke no English, the Doctor was deeply moved by this gesture.

His students later asked him, “Why was it so important for you to say thank you in English?”

He gave a very interesting answer, on the topic of *Modim Derabbanan*.

The Special Blessing

During the repetition of the Amidah, there’s a section called “The Thanksgiving of the Sages—*Modim Derabbanan*,” a small prayer which is recited by the congregation, when the chazan reaches the section of *Modim*, the blessing of thanksgiving.

Why is it called “*Modim Derabbanan*”?

The name seems to emerge from the source of the prayer in the Talmud. Tractate *Sotah* gives various opinions about what the congregation should say when the chazan reaches “*Modim*,” and a few different short prayers are suggested by different sages. The Talmud therefore concludes, “*Rav Papa* said, therefore, we say them all.” To please all opinions, we say all the formulations suggested in the Talmud. Therefore—some argue—this prayer is called “*Modim Derabbanan*,” “the thanksgiving of the sages.”

But the whole prayer seems puzzling: The repetition of the amidah was established for those Jews who don't know how to pray. By listening to the chazan and responding "amen" to the blessings, they are considered to have davened themselves. So, if "amen" suffices for the entire prayer, why do we suddenly force the congregation who doesn't know how to read, to recite the "modim" themselves?

The Abudraham offers a very interesting explanation: You can make a request through a messenger, but "thank you," you have to say yourself. In the other blessings, where we ask G-d for health, wisdom and so on, the chazan's recitation will suffice, but when we finally thank G-d for all those blessings, we need to show up ourselves. This, the rabbi in Jerusalem explained, is why he insisted on conveying his thanks in such a personal way.

This reminded me of a nice story I heard about United Hatzalah in Jerusalem: One bright day, a person entered the main offices and asked to meet the dispatch who answered the phones. One of the workers offered to take him on a tour of the building and showed him where the call center was. "Why are you so interested to meet them?" the worker asked.

The man recounted that 45 minutes earlier, he was riding in a taxi when he spotted his friend sitting on a bench at a bus station. He asked the taxi driver to stop, and invited his friend to join him in the taxi; just a few minutes later, his friend collapsed.

He immediately called Hatzalah, and within minutes, two

volunteer paramedics on motorcycle ambulances arrived. They performed CPR on him, used a defibrillator, and administered three electric shocks. Ultimately, they saved his life.

“I thanked the two volunteers who saved my friend’s life,” the fellow explained, “but I felt a personal need to come to the call center and thank the person who answered the call. I wanted to shake his hand.” Gratitude isn’t sent through a messenger; a “thank you” should be expressed personally.

The Language Difference

But still, why would it be so important to thank someone specifically in English? What’s wrong with saying “thank you” in Hebrew?

This brings us to the weekly Torah portion.

In Parshat Ki Tavo, we read about the commandment of Bikkurim, the first mitzvah that an agriculturist needs to fulfill with the produce of his field. When someone grew figs or pomegranates and so on, and spotted the first ones that ripened, they would mark them with a ribbon and declare, “These are the first fruits.” Then, they would fill a basket with these first fruits and bring them to Jerusalem, where they would bring them to the Temple, and present them to the kohen.

However, they hadn’t yet fully fulfilled the mitzvah. The Torah continues to say that the mitzvah includes reciting an entire monologue known as “Mikra Bikkurim” (the Declaration of First Fruits), where the person acknowledges to G-d that He brought them out of Egypt and led them to “a land flowing with milk and

honey,” thanking G-d for his blessings. Only after completing the Bikkurim declaration was the mitzvah complete.

This prayer was the first instance of people “feeling out of place in shul.” The Sifrei (Deuteronomy 21:1) says that initially, they would recite it with those who didn’t know Hebrew. However, due to their embarrassment, the practice changed—they established that it would be recited with everyone: those who knew how to read and those who didn’t.

This was a result of the reality described in the Book of Ezra, that during the Second Temple period, many people no longer spoke the Holy Tongue. There were times when even the High Priest in the Temple only understood Aramaic! Naturally, there were many people who were embarrassed to admit their lack of Hebrew fluency, and the sages realized that people were avoiding the Temple, so they instituted that the prayer should be recited for everyone to repeat.

But couldn’t they just solve this issue easily? There are plenty of prayers said in Aramaic, and Halachah states that it’s totally okay—and even preferable—to pray in a language you understand. So, why wouldn’t those who don’t know Hebrew just say Mikra Bikkurim in Aramaic or in whatever language they knew?

The answer can be found in the Talmud’s statement in Tractate Sotah (32a). There, the Gemara talks about which prayers you can say in any language and which prayers have to be said in Hebrew. You can say Shema or the Amidah in any language, but there are certain prayers that the Mishnah says have to be in

Hebrew. And guess what? The first one on that list is “Mikra Bikkurim.”

Why? Maybe it’s because when you’re saying “thank you,” it should come from the heart—and be in G-d’s language, the Holy Tongue -Hebrew.

Let’s Show Gratitude

My friends, showing gratitude is incredibly important. And remember: if someone were to walk into the Holy Temple with empty hands, without his First Fruit, they wouldn’t even be allowed in. True thankfulness to G-d is demonstrated through our deeds.

We are now in the month of Elul, getting ready for Rosh Hashanah, that special time when we stand before G-d to request a good and sweet new year. Let’s not come empty-handed. The Rebbe always mentioned the tradition to take up an additional mitzvah or Jewish practice in honor of the new year.

Of course, don’t commit yourself to too many mitzvos; that might, G-d forbid, leave you with nothing to take on next year.

Instead, commit to something practical that you’re confident you can achieve. Then, as Rosh Hashanah approaches, you’ll arrive with a basket brimming with mitzvot to the Holy Temple.